

Basic Principles in Improving  
CHURCH  
AND CONFERENCE  
RELATIONS



Erland Waltner

HAVE YOU EVER observed how much attention the New Testament devotes to the problem of human relations? How much Jesus had to say on forgiveness and reconciliation, and brotherly love, and spiritual fellowship, and harmonious cooperation in the cause of His kingdom! The Book of Acts records how even the early church was rocked by dissension over the ministrations to poor widows (Chapter 6) and later over the Judaistic heresy (Chapter 15). But it also records how the early church found solutions to its problems and moved forward in its life of creative Christian fellowship. Moreover, have you observed how often Paul addresses himself to the problem of Christian unity? Large blocks of First and Second Corinthians are devoted to the effort to restore proper relations in a church torn by party spirit. His letter to the Philippians touches the same problem in its fervent plea, "Have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5). Ephesians and Colossians are devoted almost entirely to the theme that the church is a body under the headship of Jesus Christ. Finally, the letters of James and Peter and John and Jude all speak pointedly to the need for right relations in the Christian brotherhood.

Our theme is then not peculiarly modern, but it is as old as the church. Our problems are not uniquely our own, but are as universal as God's people. Our solutions therefore must not be sought in our own wisdom, but in that which comes from above which according to James is "first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity" (3:17).

The topic assigned for this presentation is immense in its scope. Three levels of relations properly enter the picture: (1) relations within local churches, such as that between the minister and

the congregation or among individual members or groups within the congregation, (2) relations of the local church to the Conference, including both the district and the General Conference levels, and (3) relations among the churches within the Conference, either as individual congregations or between groups of congregations.

Clearly, such a field for discussion is vast and complex. Moreover, here is an area in which we have "all sinned and come short of the glory of God." While we may manifest the spirit of Christ in many things, no church, no minister, and no individual member would claim that he has always been consistently Christlike in all the areas of human relations involved in our church and Conference life. That is why we must devote ourselves to the improvement of these relations. Here we shall attempt to suggest basic principles drawn directly from the word of God which may guide us to better relations.

### *The Principle of Centrality*

John Ruskin in his essay on composition declared that all great art must observe what he called "the law of principality." "The great object of composition being always to secure unity; that is, to make out of many things one whole; the first mode in which this can be effected is by determining that one feature shall be more important than the rest, and that the others shall group with it in subordinate positions."<sup>1</sup> This principle applies not only in art in the usual sense, but also in the fine art of true church and Conference fellowship. The church must have one head. Nature itself teaches

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted in H. T. Kuist, *These Words Upon Thine Heart* (John Knox Press, Richmond, Va.) p. 163.



us that a body must have but one head. A two-headed creature is always a monstrosity. Paul teaches the principle of centrality in both Ephesians and Colossians, especially in Colossians 1:18 where he says of Christ, "And he is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in all things he might have the pre-eminence."

No Christian would quarrel with Paul over this assertion. We all confess the pre-eminence of Christ. But, on the other hand, there is not a single church in our Conference, nor a single individual in these churches, that does not encounter difficulty in living out this great affirmation. Our failure to live it out impairs our church and Conference relations. Let us consider some of the implications of this text.

If Christ is pre-eminent, the individual self should not be pre-eminent. In our Christian faith and especially in our Mennonite heritage we have made much of individualism. We have stressed the importance of the individual and the right of the individual to follow his own conscience and to interpret the Bible as he understands it. This emphasis has its value, but an overemphasis on the individual is both disruptive to our fellowship and contrary to the New Testament. The biblical spirit says, "Not I, but Christ." Christ is pre-eminent.

If Christ is pre-eminent, then the individual minister is not pre-eminent. The church of Corinth was divided because groups within the congregation had exalted human leaders too much, some being devoted to Paul, others to Apollos, and others to Cephas. Paul in writing to them explained that he had only planted, and Apollos had watered, but God had given the increase. An

undue exaltation of individual ministers is not only divisive, but it dishonors the pre-eminence of Christ.

If Christ is pre-eminent, the local church is not pre-eminent. Local church autonomy is a cherished emphasis in our church polity. We hold that no pope, no ecclesiastical hierarchy, not even a Conference board or a district committee has a right to dictate to the local church. But this does not mean that the local church may then go its own way without consideration for the convictions of other congregations, for the local church along with these other congregations is subject to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

But if Christ is pre-eminent, then the Conference is not pre-eminent either, nor its institutions. We need to work toward the strengthening of Conference loyalty, yet this must never be done at the expense of loyalty to Christ. We should be concerned about the loyalty of ministers and of churches to the Conference, for ethically no one has a right to the benefits of the Conference without giving loyal support to it. But in the same moment we should be even more concerned about the loyalty of our Conference and its institutions to the Lord Jesus Christ. These two concerns of loyalty to Conference and loyalty to Christ can never be separated as we seek to live out the pre-eminence of our Lord.

If Christ is pre-eminent, then our Mennonite heritage is not pre-eminent. When I say this I speak as one who is deeply appreciative of our history and heritage, as one who feels that we must do more and not less to understand and transmit this heritage, and as one who feels that it is folly to draw a contrast between Mennonitism and Christianity as we have come to understand

it. Yet we also realize that it is possible for a group to begin to worship its past and to be bound by it, substituting its heritage for Jesus Christ and His eternal word. Let us study our heritage. Let us appreciate it. Let us seek to transmit it, but always giving Christ the pre-eminence.

Church and Conference relations will be improved if all of us will not only profess but also live out the pre-eminence of Christ. An over-emphasis on the individual, on the minister, on the local church or even on the Conference, and our Mennonite heritage tends to divide us. An emphasis on Jesus Christ tends to unite. In Him, as Paul says, "all things hold together" (Col. 1:17).

### *The Principle of Balance*

When Paul was bidding farewell to the elders of Ephesus in Acts 20, he said that in his ministry there he had "kept back nothing that was profitable" (v. 20) and again that he had declared "the whole counsel of God" (v. 27). Paul proclaimed a full-orbed, well-rounded and well-balanced Christian message which included all the essential elements. This remarkable characteristic of the message of Paul is also seen in his epistles in which the tenets of doctrine and the principles of ethics are presented in striking balance.

A wheel that moves not only needs a center, but also spokes and a rim. Moreover, these spokes need to be the same length, otherwise the wheel will be unbalanced. Is this not another clue to the improvement of church and Conference relations? We know what happens when one spoke of a wheel is too short, or, for that matter, too long. We know how rough it would be to ride on a wheel like that. Perhaps that is what we have been trying to do.



Christ is indeed the hub of our church and Conference wheel. But the various Christian doctrines issuing in their respective ethical expressions make up the spokes and the rim. If then we overemphasize one aspect of Christian truth at the expense of another, the wheel is unbalanced and goes "thump, thump, thump." If in the matter of doctrine we lengthen the spoke of nonresistant love at the expense of the new birth, or vice versa, or if in the matter of methods we lengthen the spoke of evangelism at the expense of Christian education, or vice versa, we tend to unbalance the wheel. On the other hand, it may be that the wheel has been unbalanced in the past and that some spoke now needs lengthening in order to get the wheel to run more smoothly.

When any aspect of the Christian gospel is neglected, a spiritual vacuum is created which leads to disruptions in the fellowship. Neglect of the Holy Spirit feeds Pentecostalism, neglect of the Bible feeds militant fundamentalism, neglect of the healing ministry feeds the healing cults. On the other side, when any aspect of the Christian truth is overemphasized and is separated from its gospel context, it becomes a heresy, at least in embryo.

In historical theology we recognize that an overemphasis on the humanity of Christ becomes a heresy, but so does an overemphasis of His deity at the expense of His humanity. Likewise, an overemphasis on human responsibility for salvation is a heresy as well as its counterpart which is an overemphasis on grace at the expense of human responsibility. Even nonresistance could become a heresy if it is overemphasized and separated from the gospel of salvation.

To achieve balance is no mere mechanical proc-

ess such as deciding to preach five sermons on the new birth and the same number on Christian love. The achievement of balance is a dynamic process which involves an intimate walk with the Lord and a diligent study of the Scriptures in their entirety. The key to proper balance is to be found in an approach to the Bible as a whole, where all the essential aspects of Christian truth are presented. But the achievement of balance also calls for an appreciation of all aspects of Christian doctrine and of all methods which the Holy Spirit uses to build up His church. It allows no place for prejudice against either evangelism or Christian education or against the doctrine of the new birth or the doctrine of nonresistant love.

### *The Principle of Discrimination*

The early church was subject to many diverting pressures from within and from without. Heresy, either of the Judaistic or of the Gnostic variety, threatened the life and unity of the church repeatedly. Much of the New Testament was written to define true Christian doctrine and to develop in Christians a sense of discrimination. The counsel of Paul in First Thessalonians 5:21 was apt for his time and for ours, "Prove all things, hold fast that which is good."

To understand some of our church and Conference problems we need to understand how our Mennonite people have been affected by a variety of outside influences which have descended on them through the radio, through visiting speakers, and through all kinds of books, pamphlets, and periodicals. At a Mennonite Cultural Conference at Hesston, Kansas, recently, Dean H. S. Bender spoke very helpfully on how Mennonites have been influenced theologically both from the side of theo-



logical liberalism and from the side of militant fundamentalism.<sup>1</sup> He made it very clear that damage had come to our fellowship not only from one but from both sources.

To see danger from one side alone and to be blind to danger from the other is to act on the basis of prejudice and not on the basis of discrimination. Discrimination means that we are able to look at any teaching or movement and on the basis of standards that we know to be valid determine what is true and what is false in them.

Currently, the various varieties of ecumenicalism in our country are making a considerable impact on the thinking of many of our people. Some of our people are clearly following the line of the American Council of Churches, a militant fundamentalist group headed by Carl McIntire. Others are more inclined to seek fellowship in the National Association of Evangelicals, a more moderate fundamentalist group. Still others follow with eager interest all that happens in the National Council of Churches and rather deplore the fact that American Mennonites could not be officially represented at the 1954 World Council sessions in Evanston. Actually, many of the tensions within our local churches and in our Conference on such matters as the Revised Standard Version, for example, are primarily the projections of the conflicts that are going on among these larger ecumenical movements. Some of our people just tend to believe everything Carl McIntire says, and others tend to believe everything the *Christian Century* says, and too few have an adequate sense

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<sup>1</sup>Harold S. Bender, "Outside Influences on Mennonite Thought," in *Proceedings of the Ninth Conference on Mennonite Educational and Cultural Problems*, Hesston, Kansas, June 18, 19, 1953.

of discrimination to separate the chaff from the wheat in either case.

The development of discrimination, however, does not come through "ten easy lessons." This too means an intimacy with the Lord Jesus Christ, a thorough acquaintance with the word of God, and an openhearted reliance on the Holy Spirit, which will enable us to detect both false doctrine and an unchristian spirit before too much damage is done. We must learn to look at all interpretations and movements through the eyes of the mind of Christ.

When we see a minister reading Reinhold Niebuhr or observe that he has the *Interpreter's Bible* on his shelf, we need not be so much worried if we know that he keeps his open Bible near at hand. Neither should we be disturbed if he reads Louis Sperry Chafer or Carl McIntire. But if he begins to substitute the writings of men—any men, whether modernists or fundamentalists, or neo-orthodox—for the word of God, then we foresee only chaos and conflict ahead in our attempt to give a unified message and to maintain an integrated fellowship in our churches. We need to read widely, on all sides of controversial questions, but we also need to read with spiritual discrimination, which will keep us from being cut loose from our moorings in Christ and His word.

### *The Principle of Maturation*

In a study of the life of the early church it becomes clear that one of the secrets of its cohesive and creative fellowship was the fact that it kept on moving forward. In Ephesians 4 Paul pleads for growth in the church, both upward and outward, "till we all come in the unity of the faith,

and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ, that we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; but speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ" (4:13-15).

In one respect the community of believers is like a man riding a bicycle. He needs to remain in motion to stay upright. When he stops moving, he starts toppling. Right relations in our churches and in our Conference depend in part on whether we are moving ahead in our faith and in our service for Christ.

Does this not mean that we must be more diligent, as individuals and as churches, in studying the meaning of our faith and in applying it in our personal and group living? If we stop studying, we will start bickering. If we slacken our pace in serving, we are more likely to devote our energy to quarreling.

As Paul challenged the Ephesians to move forward in faith and life, so we too must forge ahead in our century that we may grow up into Christ in all things. The Eden Peace Study Conference, several years ago, was one moving of the Spirit among us which has already yielded real fruitage in terms of a greater unity among us on one front of our Christian faith. But we need intense study in many other areas—in evangelism, in church discipline, in our view of the Scriptures, in our interpretation of the Christian hope, and many others.

If we come to study conferences on these and similar subjects with an earnest desire to "grow



up into Christ," such further gatherings could mean much to improve church and Conference relations.

### *The Principle of Communion*

Emil Brunner has observed that a basic heresy of historic ecclesiasticism and perhaps also of modern ecumenicalism is that it has substituted the secular idea of "unity" for the biblical teaching of "communion." In his stimulating book, *The Misunderstanding of the Church*,<sup>1</sup> he argues that the church according to the New Testament is essentially not an institution, but a "fellowship of believers," a communion in and with Christ, a common participation in Him who is our Saviour and Lord. This is essentially what Anabaptists and Mennonites have always said. From his observation he draws the conclusion that our unity, therefore, is not to be sought simply on an institutional or organizational level, for this would be artificial and superficial. Our true unity is in our communion in Christ.

If Brunner is right, then another clue to the improvement of church and Conference relations lies in the cultivation of this communion in Christ.

Communion in this sense is the exercise of true Christian love and the practice of true Christian brotherhood. In this communion in Christ we do not seek to create unity, we simply recognize our oneness in Jesus Christ and permit His presence in our midst to control all our thoughts and words and deeds pertaining to each other. In this communion First Corinthians 13 becomes flesh and blood.

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<sup>1</sup>Emil Brunner, *The Misunderstanding of the Church* (Westminster Press, Philadelphia).

This means that each member of the church considers not only the general physical and spiritual welfare of others but also respects the conscience of other brethren. Such communion says with Paul, "If food is a cause of my brother's failing, I will never eat meat, lest I cause my brother to fall" (1 Cor. 8:13).

Communion in this sense is also sharing. It is a readiness to share freely with each other our experiences with Christ, and to discuss our agreements and our differences in a spirit in which we always "speak the truth in love." In this communion we are honest enough to speak the truth plainly, but we are also loving enough to speak it tenderly so that we are all edified and the bonds of fellowship are strengthened.

We observe Holy Communion by partaking of the sacred emblems of the atoning work of Christ on the cross of Calvary. But at our Conference sessions and on many other occasions we have opportunity to demonstrate the reality of our communion and to cultivate it by sharing with each other in the precious things of Christ and by working together lovingly in the planning of our Conference program of service. This, rather than the Holy Communion, may be the real index of the health of our church and Conference relations.

In summary, here are five paths we need to take:

1. We need to live out more diligently the implications of the pre-eminence of Christ above our individualism, our ministerial authority, our local church autonomy, our Conference loyalty, and our Mennonite heritage.

2. We need to regain and maintain a better balance in our doctrinal emphases and in our church and Conference programs.

3. We need to develop discrimination in our

response to influences which come to us from the outside.

4. We need to move forward in the study of our faith and of its implications for living and service in this twentieth century.

5. We need to deepen our communion in Christ by sharing more freely our experiences of Christ and by giving expression to our faith in our common fellowship and program of service.

Halford Luccock remarks that this generation may be characterized by the word *split*.<sup>1</sup> We speak of the split atom, the split second, the split personality, split churches, and a badly split world. We as the church must be able to tell the world of Jesus Christ in whom all things hold together.

Martin Niemoeller, giving his last lecture in a series at our seminary in Chicago, declared that the church has nothing really to fear from its "flesh and blood" enemies on the outside. We have the word of Christ for it that the gates of hell can never destroy the church. But, he added very soberly, there is something that can destroy the church and there is no guarantee even in the Scriptures against that. The church can be destroyed by us Christians, from within, if we fail to give Christ His rightful place of victorious pre-eminence. But this we must not do. This we will not do.

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<sup>1</sup>Halford Luccock, *Communicating the Gospel* (Harper's, New York) p. 92.



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